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Gender Equality, Community Divisions and Autonomy: The *Prospera* Conditional Cash Transfer Program in Chiapas, Mexico

Abstract:

This article examines the gender equality component of *Prospera*, a conditional cash transfer program in Mexico that provides cash contingent on three nodes of civic engagement: health, nutrition and education. This article draws on ethnographic research in La Gloria, a settlement of indigenous Mayan refugees from Guatemala in the Mexican state of Chiapas. I identify the *Prospera* program's neoliberal features, the impact its gender equality measures have in the lives of women, their families, and in the political structure of the community of La Gloria. My findings reveal how *Prospera* reinforces gender and racial hierarchy, fosters community divisions that undercuts efforts to promote community autonomy, which raises questions about the ability of conditional cash transfers to promote development and gender equality in indigenous communities in Mexico.

Keywords: Gender Equality; Community Autonomy; Racial Hierarchy; Indigenous Mayan Communities; Conditional Cash Transfers; Chiapas, Mexico.

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Introduction:

Writing of Mexican state-local political relations, Browner (1986: 95) states, ‘[*Municipio* leaders] recognize that there are advantages to maintaining closer ties with external agencies and with the state, they also fear that close ties will lead to further loss of autonomy... Caught between conflicting competing pressures emanating from the federal government and local populations, *municipio* authorities often act ambivalently when they are subject to efforts at state incorporation through the establishment of... development projects.’

Browner’s keen observation of relations between *municipio* (township) authorities and the state remains helpful for understanding contemporary struggles for community autonomy¹ among indigenous populations and post-colonial governmental state oversight in Mexico. Using case materials from an indigenous Mayan refugee² settlement in the *ejido*³ La Gloria, in Chiapas, Mexico I will illustrate how the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program *Prospera*, much like in Browner’s example, prompts ambivalent attitudes by indigenous *municipio* authorities. I will demonstrate how this ambivalence – of both supporting and opposing the state development program – stems from a longstanding history of state neglect of indigenous Mayan communities.

¹ Rodolfo Stavenhagen (2004) defines autonomy for indigenous peoples as the right to self-determination, respect for culture and languages, and full participation in political and social processes. Scholars, however, have found that the right to indigenous autonomy is often undermined by states (Blackwell, 2012; Speed and Collier, 2000) and supranational organizations, like the International Labor Organization (ILO), which view such rights as secondary to nation-state sovereignty (Nelson, 1999). Autonomy in the Americas, therefore, according to Arturo Escobar (2010: 49), is used across the ideological spectrum and often contested.

² In this article, when the term refugee is used it will be referring to the broader dynamic of forced migration (Castles, 2003).

³ Hernández (2002: 105) defines *ejidos* as ‘communal lands divided into small lots and given to peasants for their individual use. In 1992, *ejido* lands were open to privatization by Salinas de Gortari’s Government at the beginning of 1992.’

Violence, Displacement and Incorporation of Indigenous Mayans in Mexico

A protracted war in Guatemala that dates back to the 1960s, indiscriminately targeted indigenous populations, which resulted in at least 100,000 civilian deaths and the displacement of up to 200,000 people to neighboring Mexico (1993).⁴ Participants in my study arrived in Mexico in 1982. In 1984, following a violent military raid that killed six, Mexico announced a relocation program, and forcefully resettled thousands to the Yucatan peninsula (García, 2006). The same year, to avoid further conflict and resettlement, refugees clandestinely fled further to the interior and settled in what is today La Gloria. Due to ongoing conflict in Guatemala, a repatriation program, initiated in 1987, spearheaded by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), was opposed by a majority of La Gloria's residents. As of January 2015, La Gloria has 3,601 residents,⁵ the largest settlement of Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas, Mexico. Most self-identify as either *Akateko* or *Miguelenos*, a reference to their place of origin in *San Miguel Acatán*, a municipality in the Department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala and Akatek is the dominant Mayan indigenous language.

Patricia Pessar (2001) notes that scorched earth military warfare destroyed the quotidian infrastructure of families and communities and thereby dissolved the appearance of a fixed boundary between male / public and female / private spheres. Pessar (2001) adds, that upon arriving to Mexico, 'women's ranking as a special category of refugee typically ensured that they were privileged within the camps' power geometry'

⁴ Throughout this period the US State played an important role in promoting militaristic foreign intervention in Guatemala (see Schlesinger et al., 2006).

⁵ Figure obtained from the *Cedula Microregional* provided by Dr. Giselda Cruz Torres, physician at La Gloria's health clinic (May 23, 2015). Copy archived with the author and available upon request.

(2001: 478).⁶ For instance, transnational organizations such as the UNHCR and NGOs, promoted gender rights-based initiatives that tapped into a larger history of ethnic and class based organizing in Guatemala (Pessar, 2001). The effort of these transnational agencies enabled women to increase public decision making in the camps, but faced pushback from both male refugees and agents of the Mexican State.

Ultimately, in 1995, Mexico announced a naturalization program for Guatemalan refugees. As a precondition for naturalization, the state required refugee settlement communities to cede control of schools, which incorporated a bi-cultural curriculum. The state gained control of schools in 1998, and ended UNHCR payments to local indigenous instructors. The state's unwillingness to provide credentialed instructors that speak local indigenous languages resulted in an end to bi-cultural education and is reminiscent of *indigenismo* policies promoted by the post-revolutionary Mexican state.

Indigenismo policies involved 'a politically embedded process [largely enacted by social scientists, particularly anthropologists] for contextualizing and academically 'knowing' the indigenous populations' (Smith-Oka, 2013: 32). Racial *mestizaje* underpinned *indigenismo* policies, which is a racial discourse and 'a [political] project of assimilation that fully celebrates the indigenous past while denying an indigenous present' (Blackwell, 2012: 710). Following political pressure from indigenous movements, intellectuals, and international agencies in the 1990s, the Mexican government embarked on a new policy course: to protect and promote indigenous languages and cultures (Villarreal, 2014: 779). Critics, however, charge that the multicultural agenda embraced by Mexico, and throughout much of Latin America,

⁶ 'Power geometry,' a concept coined by Doreen Massey (1994) is used to distinguish the distinct ways that power inequalities create differentiated forms of mobility.

continues to subsume racial *mestizaje* in its interaction with indigenous populations (Blackwell, 2012; Hale, 2005; Smith-Oka, 2009).

The elimination of the bi-lingual curriculum, visa restrictions to travel and employment, and the prolonged delay in distributing naturalization documents in 2005, illustrate how racial *mestizaje* underpinned the Mexican State's reluctances to fully integrate indigenous Mayan Guatemalan refugees. By the time Mexico disbursed naturalization documents to refugees, racial *mestizaje* served to compound poverty in La Gloria, and pressured many to seek international migration.

In La Gloria, a culture of male-selective international migration has evolved among Guatemalan refugees since their settlement in 1984, and has reshaped the demographic makeup of the community.⁷ For instance, 2006 census data reveals girls and women outnumber boys and men, particularly among the working age population (see Table 1). Surveys distributed to 78 students in 2006 also confirm greater international migration among men than women. Of the 78 surveys collected, students identified 188 male and 127 female relatives who pursued international migration. The disproportionate number of male emigration results in a larger proportion of female-headed households within this age group in La Gloria.

⁷ The 'culture of migration,' in which migration related knowledge and resources are spread through social networks of family, friends and community members in places of origin and destination, has been widely shown to make migration less costly (Durand et al., 2001).

	Boys/Men	Girls/Women	Total for both genders
Age 5 to 11	145	199	344
Age 12 to 14	83	105	188
Age 15 to 19	110	163	273
Age 20 to 24	34	108	142
Age 25 to 29	32	74	106
Age 30 to 34	24	69	93
Age 35 to 39	11	30	41
Age 40 to 44	18	69	87
Age 45 a 49	23	35	58
Age 50 to 54	27	38	65
Age 55 to 59	19	17	36
Age 60 to 64	24	22	46
Age 65 and above	40	52	92
Total	590	981	1571

Table 1: Migration of males in La Gloria accelerates after age 20 and plateaus at age 40, creating a gender disparity where women outnumber men in La Gloria. Source: Instituto de Salud del Estado de Chiapas Cédula de datos básicos a nivel Microregional (2006).

In La Gloria, all matters that affect the welfare of community members are resolved by (all male) *municipio* leaders and male and female head-of-household community members during monthly public assemblies in the central town square (*salón de actos*, hereafter *salón*). Attendance is mandatory, and a household head that fails to attend is fined. *Municipio* authorities oversee all internal community affairs and negotiate with external entities, particularly with the *cabecera* (head town). The *municipio* of La Gloria is structurally similar to others found throughout rural Mesoamerica in that it is a civil-religious hierarchy or *cargo* system (Cancian, 1967; DeWalt, 1975). Male head of households are required to fulfill unremunerated *cargos* that can include the following: cleaning the Church, cutting weeds from public walkways, cleaning schools, and serve in leadership positions in the *municipio*. Married women are not required to perform *cargos*, but when a male head of household is unable to fulfill his term of service, they are

informally pressured to fulfill community obligations. While women are able to participate in most *cargos*, only men fill leadership positions in the *municipio*.

The standard division of labor in La Gloria households follows strict gender lines. Families with both male and female household heads typically involve men participating in farm work, while women balance household duties and informal remunerative work (e.g. managing makeshift storefronts, selling homemade foods, etc.). Domestic and international migration patterns, however, have reconstituted the gendered division of labor in La Gloria. The absence of many male heads of household means more women take on *cargos*. Female head of households, faced with carework, remunerative work, and community obligations, reinforce the gendered division of labor by placing greater responsibilities on their daughters to fulfill these tasks.

The rise of female-headed households coincides with an increased participation of women in assembly-wide meetings. The overrepresentation of women in La Gloria,⁸ coupled with the distribution of naturalization documents, which grant La Gloria residents the ability to vote and create civic organizations, is reshaping political alignments across gender lines. The all male *municipio* leaders, who have tried to consolidate their authority over the community, view civic organizations as a threat to their authority. One such civic organization is *Mayaonbej* (we are Maya). *Mayaonbej's* mission of promoting local development attracts many of La Gloria's residents, and its membership reflects La Gloria's uneven adult gender demographic; of its 30 members,

⁸ As of January 2015, women represent 57% (n = 640) while men represent 43% (n = 482) of the working age population (ages 15 – 54) in La Gloria. Figures are based on annual census survey provided by Dr. Griselda Cruz Lopez, physician at La Gloria's health clinic. Copy archived with the author and available upon request.

20 are women. Women also play a role in the leadership of the organization, two women serve as treasurers and one is a secretary.

Mayaonbej successfully obtained financial support from the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Communities (hereafter CDI). Qualification for CDI funds required applicants to have experienced forced displacement in Chiapas. *Mayaonbej* identified their forced displacement and indigenous background as central factors that combined to disadvantage La Gloria residents in their CDI application. The receipt of naturalization also helped make *Mayaonbej* members' meet eligibility requirements for state support from the CDI, which provided funds for the purchase of 248 hectares of land for a self-sustainable agricultural project.⁹ The allotment, three times the size of La Gloria, provides its members an opportunity to work the land for agricultural consumption and sell or trade their harvest.

A treasurer of the organization, Doña Domingo, mentioned that 'in *Mayaonbej*, all 20 women have naturalization, and before any election, all members discuss how they are going to vote.'¹⁰ Yet, despite Doña Domingo's comment of how women work together to help boost a political candidate for local elections, male power and leadership prevail in that men remain the main leaders of *Mayaonbej*. Nevertheless, *Mayaonbej* provides a space for women to support a political candidate for local elections that may potentially destabilize the clientelist relationship between the *municipio* and *cabecera* leadership. *Mayaonbej's* ability to obtain funds to support cooperative stores, land for its members, and increased political and economic possibilities for women to participate in

⁹ Phone interview with Director of *Mayaonbej* conducted January 21, 2014.

¹⁰ Phone interview conducted January 23, 2014.

civic life, has helped reinforce class distinctions and exacerbated gendered conflicts over power in La Gloria.

Women's involvement in civic organizations and party politics helps destabilize the normative gendered ethnic identity of indigenous Mayan women as ancillary to men. The specter of women's increased economic and political clout in La Gloria was compounded by the arrival of the *Prospera* program. The regularization of status and documentation of the ongoing economic inequalities, made the community eligible to receive *Prospera* stipends in 2002. As of 2015, 426 (or 93%) out of a total of 456 families in La Gloria received stipends.¹¹

The *Prospera* program explicitly links gender equality – strengthening women's position in the family *and* society – as part of the program's goals of eliminating the intergenerational transmission of poverty (Castañeda and Aldez-Carroll, 1999). As a gender empowerment tool, the *Prospera* CCT program should, theoretically help increase the civic participation of women and further destabilize the centralization of power by *municipio* male leaders. To explore this further, this article provides ethnographic findings that challenge that narrative.

¹¹ Information on the number of recipient families obtained from La Gloria's *Prospera* coordinators (May 29, 2015) and figure for total number of families obtained from the *Cedula Microregional* provided by Dr. Giselda Cruz Torres, physician at La Gloria's health clinic (May 23, 2015). Copy archived with the author and available upon request.

The *Prospera* Conditional Cash Transfer Program and Gender Equality

The *Prospera* program relies on neoliberal governing tools that require greater responsibility for self-care and a corresponding retrenchment of the state to promote women's 'empowerment' and 'participation' in the household and community. This article asks the following questions: Does the *Prospera* program offer genuine new opportunities for women to increase their authority in La Gloria? How does the *Prospera* program reshape struggles for indigenous autonomy?

The implementation of CCT programs in 29 'developing' countries (Fiszbein and Schady, 2009), with many containing gender equality goals (Lomelí, 2008), augments the significance of this question. Studying the neoliberal structures for compliance under *Prospera* will help illuminate some of the program's paradoxical consequences for stipendiaries (*titulares*), which include: the reinforcement of traditional gender norms and the erosion of ideals of community autonomy. This article's focus on how each of these factors impact indigenous women's political agency has important policy implications for the ability of CCTs to promote gender equality, respect the cultural autonomy of indigenous peoples, and poverty reduction in the global South.

The development of *Prospera*, and other CCT programs in the global South, coincides with what many scholars identify as the 'crisis of neo-liberalism' (Escobar, 2010). Neo-liberalism, commonly linked to the ascendance of the Chicago School of political economy, embraces the retrenchment of the welfare state and radical 'free-market' policies that repudiates state regulation on trade (Brown, 2003; Klein, 2007).

'Free market' policies took off in Latin America following the regions' balance of payments difficulties, and reduced availability of external credit following the 1982 debt

crisis, which allowed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to become the 'lender of last resort.' Placed in a unique position to dictate macroeconomic policy, the IMF recommended the same 'free market' policy package to all of Latin America: devaluation, reduction of fiscal deficits, decreases in real wages, the relaxation of controls on trade and capital flows, and elimination of subsidies (Pastor, 1989: 92). The introduction of these policies fostered a rise of inequality in Latin America (Pastor, 1987).

The rise of social inequality in Mexico created a social and political crisis of legitimacy, which compelled the administration of President Salinas to increase social expenditure and create the National Program of Solidarity (PRONASOL). Yaschine (1999) defines PRONASOL as a compensatory decentralized demand-based anti-poverty program that required the poor and extreme poor to benefit in the areas of social welfare, production, and regional development. Market-oriented economic reforms continued under PRONASOL. Ongoing corruption, mismanagement and clientelism, severely limited the program's ability to address the real causes of poverty (Yaschine, 1999). Some scholars (Pastor and Wise, 2004) argue that these same market reforms and 'safety-net' spending partially induced the 1994 financial crisis, which resulted in an expansion of poverty in more than half the population (Peck and Theodore., 2010: 199).

Government intervention in agriculture helped ameliorate the negative impact of domestic economic reforms and market liberalization policies by underwriting consumption in low-income households in Mexico. The 1994 financial crisis, however, accelerated attacks against PRONASOL. This led to the liquidation of this and other rural development programs along with access to agricultural credit, which helped secure

market oriented reforms that presaged the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Tetreault, 2010).

The passage of NAFTA, however, did not stimulate sufficient job growth in Mexico, which faced a net loss of up to 300,000 jobs (Saldaña-Portillo, 2005: 756). Ongoing financial constraints compelled the administration of President Zedillo, to seek a more cost-effective approach, in line with a neo-liberal agenda, in designing an anti-poverty program. Multilateral banks and state technocrats, ostensibly to increase the security of the poor, embraced a risk management approach that developed their capacity to ‘cope, mitigate or reduce’ their risks (World Bank, 2001: 1). ‘Empowerment’ under the risk-management approach maintained a neo-liberal aim, which involves ‘...*extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action...*’ (Brown, 2003: 3; emphasis in original). These values underpinned the creation of the *Progres*a program in 1997, renamed *Oportunidades* in 2002, and *Prospera* in 2014.

Like PRONASOL, *Prospera* aims to alleviate extreme poverty in Mexico’s rural, semi-urban and urban areas, but as a CCT program, it provides cash directly to beneficiaries rather than through intermediaries or bureaucracies. *Titulares* receive funds contingent on three nodes of civic engagement: health, nutrition and education.¹² The civic participation requirement distinguishes it from welfare programs, where unconditional money is given to needy populations. By 2009, 1.3 million (or 22 percent) out of nearly five million *Prospera* beneficiaries were indigenous (World Bank, 2009), but few studies exist on the program’s impact in indigenous communities.¹³

¹² See Yaschine (1999) for historical background on the shift of anti-poverty programs in Mexico.

¹³ Ramírez (2006) identifies how *Prospera* stipends ‘target’ indigenous municipalities more than non-indigenous ones, but makes no assessment of the program’s qualitative impact. A study by Bando et al.

To receive funds, five conditions must be met. Medical practitioners are responsible for documenting the first three conditions: 1. Household heads must attend monthly medical ‘talks’; 2. Starting at secondary school, youth must also attend bi-monthly medical ‘talks’; 3. All recipient family members must have their weight, height, and girth measured by medical staff biannually; Teachers are responsible for documenting the last two conditions. 4. Youth must maintain an 85 percent minimum school attendance requirement; 5. Youth must also meet a 60 percent grade point average. Assuming that all five conditions are met, the Secretariat of Social Development (SEDESOL) makes bimonthly payments (Stecklov et al., 2005: 771; citing Adato Cody and Ruel, 2000).¹⁴

Part of the program’s strategy to improve gender equity in recipient communities is the distribution of the transfers to mothers, who are viewed by policy makers as more ‘responsible’ than men in the maintenance of the family and the home. An evaluation of CCTs in the Americas revealed that programs generally ‘yield more involvement by women in household decision making, improved self-esteem, and greater knowledge about health and nutrition’ (Lomeli, 2008: 290; citing Villatoro, 2005). Nevertheless, contradictions exist on the ability of conditional cash transfers to realize gender equality.

The two primary mechanisms used to ensure receipt of cash transfers - educational and health requirements - are framed as promoting gender equality. Molyneux (2006) distinguishes the *Prospera* program’s gender equality measures as consisting of *equality* measures for girls, who receive greater stipends than boys, whereas

(2005) does make such an evaluation, but excluded states with the highest proportion of indigenous residents.

¹⁴ As of 2015, stipendiaries receive 950 Mexican Pesos (95 USD), an increase of 9 USD from 2014. Interview with Lorena (March 3, 2015).

maternalist measures target mothers for contraceptive surveillance. For instance, to close the gender gap in educational attainment, starting at middle school, girls receive 10 percent more in cash transfers than boys.¹⁵ By providing increased incentives to young women, scholars argue that ‘in the future they will keep their own children in school longer, yielding significant downstream effects on the health and nutrition of children’ (Lomelí, 2008: 489; citing Morley and Coady, 2003).

As the indigenous generally have higher rates of impoverishment than the non-indigenous (Borja-Vega et al., 2007), the downstream effects of *Prospera* should, theoretically, benefit the indigenous population in the areas of health and education. Studies of the *Prospera* program’s health component, however, reveal how attendance at talks, necessary to meet the conditional health requirements, discipline women to meet so-called ‘appropriate models of motherhood and reproduction’ as well as increase unpaid care-work responsibilities for women (Molyneux, 2006).¹⁶ Other research reveals increased social monitoring by health care professionals that pressure indigenous women to comply with the uptake of contraceptives (Smith-Oka, 2009). Most alarming, González Montes and Mojarro (2012) reveal how one in four recipient women did not participate in the decision to receive sterilization. According to González Montes and Mojarro (2012) recipient women have less autonomy compared to women without the program, a larger proportion (30%) of non-recipient women made the independent decision to seek sterilization, whereas a smaller number (13%) of recipient women did so. These

¹⁵ The value of *Prospera* cash transfers in Mexico is equal to one half or two thirds of the full-time child wage (Schultz, 2004).

¹⁶ See Zavala de Cosío (1992) for a review of joint poverty alleviation programs and family planning in Mexico since the 1970s.

ethnographic studies corroborate the World Bank's assessment of 'a lack of fit of poverty programs with indigenous interests and needs' (Giugale et al., 2001).

Evaluations of the *Prospera* program's education component have been mixed. An external evaluation that examined the impact of the *Prospera* program among *mestizo* and indigenous populations found the program increased intergenerational schooling among indigenous females by two years (González de la Rocha et al., 2008). González de la Rocha et al.'s (2008) decision to restrict their sample to communities that have schools and healthcare centers nearby, who the scholars admittedly recognize are unevenly distributed and of poor quality in indigenous communities may help explain this finding. Their study contrasts to Behrman et al.'s (2011) study that utilized data obtained from Skoufias and McClafferty's (2001) evaluation of *Prospera* (then named *Oportunidades*), which excluded states with the largest percentage of indigenous peoples, and revealed no significant impact among older girls in secondary school enrollment. The exclusion of states with the largest percentage of indigenous peoples, who face greater educational inequities and higher rates of impoverishment, raises serious questions regarding the validity and generalizability of these studies for such communities, and the ability of CCTs to advance gender equity goals.

Indeed, a number of scholars emphasize how conditional cash transfer programs actually reinforce traditional gender roles and ignore the structural factors that fuel poverty (Molyneux, 2006, Molyneux, 2008a, Corboz, 2013, Largaespada Fredersdorff, 2006, García Falconi, 2004, Cohen and Franco, 2006). Missing in these studies, however, is an examination of how, in the process of reinforcing gender roles, CCTs may also be reshaping racial hierarchy. The case of La Gloria, provides an opportunity to examine

how the *Prospera* program reshapes gender *and* race hierarchy, and the impact this has on the ability of indigenous community members to maintain a degree of autonomy from the state.

Neoliberal Governance, Conditional Cash Transfer Programs and the Remaking of Racial Hierarchy

Scholars identify the objective of disseminating market values in new poverty agendas as reflective of a ‘third-way’ reformist approach to social policy (Giddens, 1998; Gledhill, 2001). This perspective ‘takes an intermediary position whereby the state should be responsible for reducing inequality and redistributing wealth by turning the poor into responsible, self-actualizing subjects who are capable of lifting themselves out of poverty via entrepreneurial or other labor activities’ (Corboz, 2013: 68). ‘Third-way’ neo-liberalism promotes a particular type of political rationality, ‘as governmentality – a mode of governance encompassing but not limited to the state, and one which produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social’ (Brown, 2003: 1).¹⁷

For instance, Ong (2006) views neoliberal policies as accentuating this process by rationalizing governing and self-governing in order to ‘optimize’ the introduction of market-driven calculations that can preserve market principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness. Molyneux (2008b), however, identifies a relative absence of politics

¹⁷ Michel Foucault (1980, 1988) proposed ‘governmentality’ as an analytic construct for connecting population to power beyond state-centered processes. Governmentality is a form of rule that draws on three forms of power: the first is through direct governmental bureaucracy that intervenes in macrosocial processes and individual behaviors; the second is governance through disciplinary institutions run by professional experts; and the third form of modern power is through self-governance of individuals (Greenhalgh and Winckler, 2005: 23).

in scholarship that examines neoliberalism. If politics is discussed, Molyneux (2008b: 786) argues, it is often subsumed to a depoliticized form of governmentality that frames civil society as colluding (unwittingly) in extending neoliberal hegemony. This article answers Molyneux's (2008b) call for a more nuanced analysis of neoliberalism, but also examines its impact on remaking gender *and* racial hierarchy in Latin America.

A growing number of scholars identify how neoliberal policies augment racial inequalities in Latin America and reshape racial ideology (Hale, 2005, Saldaña-Portillo, 2005). In Mesoamerica, racial ideology is structured by a ladino (non-Indian) discourse, which operates as a regulatory mechanism that structures race and gender categories, often in contradictory fashion, to distinguish differences between the Indian and non-Indian (Smith, 1990, Hale, 1996). For instance, one ladino discourse locates difference on phenotypic biological markers, while another, *mestizaje*, trumps culture over biology in determining ethnic difference (Nelson, 1999). These discourses operate simultaneously and are informed by sex, gender, and class inequities.

While *mestizaje* discourse works toward a unifying national identity that recognizes cultural difference, it does so in a manner that offers recognition by the secular state in exchange for compliance with neoliberal economic policies (Hale, 2005) that privilege bourgeois ideas of appropriate heteronormative sexuality (Smith, 2010). Scholars trace these ideas of sexuality to the colonization of the Americas, shaped by a logic of racialized sexual violence, which continues to structure post-colonial state policies toward indigenous populations (Smith, 2003, Mallon, 1996). Indeed, according to Blackwell (2012), the perception of indigenous people as more sexist, backward, and non-modern, persists. Contemporary ethnographic studies reveal a different picture from

the gender-based economic and social asymmetries of relatively closed corporate communities that characterized indigenous Mayan communities in the 1950s (Wolf, 1957). A confluence of factors that include: urban and international migration (Taylor et al., 2006, Rus, 2009), individual actors (Manago and Greenfield, 2011), and social movements (Blackwell, 2012) have helped women gain greater voice in indigenous Mayan communities.

Claims of an inherent inequality in indigenous communities revolve around hegemonic constructions of indigenous culture, which becomes a rationale for the post-colonial state to promote policies that engage in a ‘paradoxical ‘fixing’ of indigenous identity (both supporting Mayan culture and ‘repairing’ it through ladinoization)’ (Nelson, 1999: 209). My study of the *Prospera* program provides an opportunity to uncover how ladinoization underlies the development program’s paradoxical consequences in an indigenous community, which ostensibly aims to empower women. The case of La Gloria builds on this literature and explores how the *Prospera* program, and its neoliberal features – conditional program requirements – reinforce gender divisions of labor, power and decision-making, across generations that raise questions on the program’s ability to meet its aims of gender equality and community autonomy for indigenous populations.

Methods

This article is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2004-2007 and 2014-2015 that included participant observation, formal and informal interviews with indigenous Mayans in La Gloria and other participants enumerated below. I conducted archival research on indigenous Mayan communities as a Visiting Fellow at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS-Sureste) in the early summer of 2004. Following a community wide vote, to ensure sound ethical procedures, La Gloria community members granted permission for my research in late August of 2004, which also included a photo-documentary component. Professional photographer and research assistant, Manuel Gil, co-directed the photographic documentation of community events.

Participant observation and ethnographic field notes at the community clinic, schools, and community assembly provided an opportunity to learn how *Prospera's* conditional requirements are enforced in each site. Structured and semi-structured interviews, directed by the researcher, included medical personnel (n = 5), coordinators of the *Prospera* program in La Gloria (n = 3), teachers (n = 10), stipendiary students (n = 17), and head of households (n = 30). I also administered a survey to a convenience sample of 78 high school students. The survey aimed to identify forces impinging on youths' lives that might compel domestic or international migration. All interviews lasted between one to two hours, were conducted in Spanish, and when permitted, were recorded. Two research assistants transcribed the recorded interviews, and all observational and interview data were subjected to content analysis.

The Distribution of *Prospera* Stipends in La Gloria

In 2007, three years after the start of fieldwork in La Gloria, female coordinators of the *Prospera* program gave the photographer and I permission to conduct participant observation and take photographs during the distribution of program funds. Heavily armed guards, who as a rule accompany *Prospera* agents, surrounded the premises of the salón. A long line of *Prospera* recipients patiently waited in the *salón* ready to provide *Prospera* agents with documents to confirm meeting conditionality requirements. At this point, a *Prospera* agent directed an officer to request that the photographer stop taking pictures. I informed the officer that we obtained permission to take photographs from the local female community coordinators.



Figure 1: A *Prospera* Program administrator, accompanied by armed security guard, confirms conditionality requirements are met to distribute stipends. Photographed by Manuel Gil.

The Program administrator, displeased with my response, asked an officer to approach the local male *municipio* leadership to reiterate his request for the photographer

to halt taking pictures. Almost immediately, the *municipio* leaders returned with the officer, and without ever once discussing the matter with the local *Prospera* coordinators, requested that all photography equipment be removed from the *salón*. To deescalate the situation, the photographer stowed all photo equipment and we left. As we were doing so a number of the male leaders surrounded us just outside the *salón*, and deliberated the possibility of placing us in the local jail or removing us from the community on the grounds that we did not request formal permission from the *municipio*.

Just then, Maria and her partner Tomás arrived and asked that the *municipio* leadership allow the community to decide if the photographer and I should be allowed to use photography and continue our project.¹⁸ Surprised by Maria and Tomás's intervention, one of the *municipio* leaders paradoxically argued that to allow us to take photographs during the distribution of *Prospera* funds posed the risk of the civil servants absconding with all the money, which many families depend on. If such a thing would happen, he argued, how would the male *municipio* leadership respond? The logic of his response, however, overlooked how taking pictures could help keep *Prospera* agents honest in their interactions with *titulares*. Fortunately, Maria intervened to argue that state *Prospera* agents are required to distribute funds to beneficiary families and our photographic equipment posed no threat to the agents or soldiers. Exasperated, the *municipio* leaders reiterated that no more photographs should be taken of the distribution of *Prospera* funds in the *salón*. Before departing, one added that a public meeting would be held to determine whether we could remain in La Gloria and continue taking pictures, but in the end there was none. By demanding that the community make a final decision

¹⁸ The community of La Gloria had voted in favor of our research in 2004.

regarding the use of photography in public spaces, Maria and her partner Tomás momentarily destabilized the masculine authority of *municipio* leaders.

What is instructive of this tense and conflict-ridden moment is that neither *Prospera* state agents nor *municipio* leaders approached *Prospera* female coordinators, who provided permission for the photographer and me to conduct participant observation and photograph the distribution of stipends. Instead, both aimed to speak *for* the interests of La Gloria's women, who are the direct beneficiaries of the program.

In the Name of Gender Equity: *Prospera* and the Reinforcement of Gender Hierarchy in the Household

As an active recipient of the *Prospera* program, Lorena's¹⁹ experiences offer an excellent opportunity to examine if meeting program conditions help strengthen women's positions in the family, reinforce unequal gender relations, or some combination of both. Since 2002, Lorena received a *Prospera* stipend, which helped supplement her family's income.²⁰ During this time, she was enrolled in high school, and meeting the program's academic and attendance requirements. She graduated in 2005, just at the time that the family learned that her father (who had migrated to the US in 2001) fractured his arm in a work related injury.

The father's injury and loss of employment seriously compromised the family's income. Lorena's mother, eager to care for her husband and find work on her own, quickly made plans to join her husband. However, continued receipt of *Prospera* cash stipends for three younger children posed a problem; the program requires a head of

¹⁹ Due to fear of losing *Prospera* stipends, my interlocutor requested use of a pseudonym to maintain anonymity.

²⁰ Interview dated September 17, 2006.

household (over the age of 18) to be identified as a *titular*. With no one else available to serve in that capacity, Lorena agreed to be identified as the head of household²¹ for receipt of *Prospera* stipends, and at age 19 assumed parental duties for her siblings.

While Lorena was saddened that she could not pursue her studies, she was fulfilling her familial duty – assisting her siblings in furthering their education and hopefully, their family’s economic standing. Indeed, Lorena’s sacrifice enabled both parents to send \$1,000 USD per month in remittances, which helped cover tuition costs for two of her seven siblings. But seeing her younger siblings continue their studies and not be able to pursue school herself weighed heavily on Lorena. The clash between her own educational aspirations, and her caretaking obligations, became evident during one informal interview when a tearful Lorena tried to understand why her parent’s extended the timeline for her to return to school from one to two years. Follow-up interviews in 2014 and 2015 confirm Lorena continues to serve as a *titular* and has been selected to be a program coordinator.

Program coordinators are required by the SEDESOL, which administers the *Prospera* program, to complete F1 forms used to enroll prospective recipient families. Every recipient maintains a copy of this form, which contains household demographic information. *Prospera* requires all members of the recipient family to present themselves at the local clinic every six months, and without any privacy the nurse measures every family member’s weight, height, and girth. If a member of the recipient family identified in the F1 form is absent, the *de facto* head of household can obtain a *constancia de*

²¹ ‘Household head’ as specified by *Prospera* is defined as ‘a person that makes important decisions in a household and who (due to age, experience, authority, respect, moral or economic dependency) is recognized as a leader by other household members. See: (http://www.sedesol.gob.mx/es/SEDESOL/Informacion_del_Programa_Seguro_de_Vida), accessed May 17, 2015.

ausencia (certificate of absence, hereafter *constancia*) from *municipio* authorities prior to the biannual medical exam. The *constancia* allows the disbursement of program funds to continue for a period of six months. If the absent family member does not return within this six-month period, program coordinators report the absent family member to SEDESOL, which cuts *Prospera* funds in half for the recipient household.

Recipients of the *Prospera* program in La Gloria are divided into five sectors, and each is assigned three program coordinators who share administrative responsibility in ensuring that *titulares* meet program requirements. Program coordinators reside close to the recipient households they oversee and maintain an informal record of the migratory patterns of absent family members of each recipient household. This informal record goes undocumented and is not shared with medical staff in the clinic, SEDESOL staff, or *municipio* leaders.²² Four sector coordinators agreed to disclose information on the number of parental household members who emigrated to the U.S. and throughout Mexico to Lorena, who also compiled the same data for her sector.²³ Among recipient families (n = 426) there are 259 *titular* mothers who receive *Prospera* stipends and have husbands residing in the household. The number of *de facto* female head of households, as a consequence of an absent husband who migrated to the United States and within Mexico number 40 and 22, respectively (see table 2). Of the recipient head of household mothers with a conjugal partner (n = 321), close to 20% have husbands who live and work outside of La Gloria. An additional 77 mothers and 19 fathers are recipient head of

²² A phone interview with Dr. Giselda Cruz Torres, physician at La Gloria's health clinic (May 26, 2015) and with a *municipio* leader (May 27, 2015), confirmed how both do not compile a record of the migratory patterns of absent household members in recipient households.

²³ Due to high rates of illiteracy, only one coordinator per sector is literate and is responsible for keeping a written record of *Prospera* recipient households. Consequently, other coordinators could not be interviewed to verify data provided by the four coordinators interviewed by Lorena.

households under the *Prospera* program following the death or separation of their conjugal partner.²⁴

<i>Prospera titular</i> recipient	Fathers based in US	Fathers based in Mexico	Fathers based in La Gloria
Head of household mothers	40	22	259

Table 2: Husbands who emigrated to the U.S., throughout Mexico, or stayed in La Gloria.

Additionally, I discovered how despite the program's conditional health component requirement for heads of household to attend monthly medical 'talks' on hygiene, mothers primarily attend these monthly talks, which largely focus on contraceptive use as opposed to more general hygiene issues. Lorena, moreover, confirmed that six other unmarried women between the ages of 18 to 22 were also identified as *titulares* under *Prospera*. Of these women, three have both parents and one has a widowed mother in the US. In contrast, only two single men were identified as *titulares* under the *Prospera* program, taking parental duties for their nephews – each as a consequence of the death of grandparents who previously served as these children's guardians. Two female and both male *titular* youth have a father residing with them; all paternal figures preferred not to be identified as *titulares*. The proportion of *de facto* recipient head of household mothers who do not have a conjugal partner (n = 139) in La Gloria is 32%, while the number of recipient youth (n = 9) is 2% of the total number (n = 426) of recipient households.

²⁴ Specific information regarding the number of conjugal partners who died, or those who separated and possibly pursued domestic or international migration is unknown.

All *titular* youth, like recipient mothers and fathers, must attend bi-monthly ‘talks’ at La Gloria’s clinic to meet health conditionality requirements.²⁵ Lorena’s case, along with other young *titulares* who remained in La Gloria to care for their younger family members, illustrates the paradoxical implications of the *Prospera* program, which ostensibly aims to empower women, but in many ways reinforces gender divisions of labor across generations.

Discussion

The violent military displacement from Guatemala and Mexico’s prolonged denial to grant refugee status and citizenship helped create conditions that reinforced poverty in La Gloria. Following the distribution of naturalization documents, La Gloria’s residents were now able to form civic associations like *Mayaonbej*. Naturalization and many years of outright neglect, a consequence of racist *mestizaje* policies, also made La Gloria eligible to receive *Prospera* stipends. The civic organization, *Mayaonbej*, provides an opportunity to contrast the *Prospera* program’s ability to meet its gender equality goals to a local development program.

Mayaonbej’s successful financial support obtained from the CDI – a process that involved identifying its constituents as former refugees, indigenous peoples, and Mexican citizens – illustrates how ethnic, national, and migrant identities are utilized to strategically engage with the state to further local development goals. While *Mayaonbej*’s successfully obtained CDI funds to purchase a sizable plot of land for self-sustainable agricultural projects for its constituency, it also reinforced class and gender distinctions.

²⁵ Interview, dated January 7, 2014. Due to fear of losing *Prospera* stipends, these young *titulares* declined to participate in the study.

For instance, *Mayaonbej* helped create development projects that include women-led cooperative stores, providing them an opportunity to supplement their incomes. The success of *Mayaonbej*, however, has produced resentment and tension with the *municipio* leadership, who view *Mayaonbej* as a threat to their control of the larger community. These divisions, previously contained within the community, took on new form following the distribution of naturalization documents, which provided residents the opportunity to participate in party politics. The large number of women, some of whom hold local leadership positions in *Mayaonbej* (albeit subordinate to men) and the federal state run conditional cash transfer program *Prospera* compounds intra-communal conflict in La Gloria.

Findings in La Gloria reveal contradictions and tensions that undergird the implementation of the *Prospera* conditional cash transfer program. One of the *Prospera* program's goals includes the promotion of gender equality. Participant observation and photographs taken of the distribution of funds in the *salón* revealed how program staff asserted their taken-for-granted authority to oppose the use of photography and refused to confer with local female program coordinators who provided permission to visually document the event. When the armed security guard alerted La Gloria's *municipio* authorities of the *Prospera* program administrator's disapproval of the use of photography during the distribution of program stipends, the *municipio* authorities promptly reiterated the request to stow all photo equipment. While the designated function of *municipio* authorities is the preservation of community unity and limiting external intervention, they all too quickly disregarded the agency of La Gloria women who provided permission for the photographer and I to take photographs and conduct

participant observation. Only two community members risked opprobrium and defended our actions, and in the process questioned the centralization of community authority in the *municipio*.

That incident revealed the ongoing gendered power dynamics that undergird the ambivalent alliances between state agents of the *Prospera* program and *municipio* authorities in the community. Local coordinators of the *Prospera* program in La Gloria create a space where women can engage in political action. *Municipio* authorities, acutely aware of the overrepresentation of women – who following the distribution of naturalization documents can participate in electoral politics – view such spaces with distrust. To allow women to have full autonomy of public spaces is viewed as a threat to the ruling party's control of the *cabecera* and the androcentric consolidation of community authority by the *municipio*. Consequently, *municipio* authorities prohibit women from addressing political matters in *Prospera* related gatherings (Ruiz Lagier, 2007: 277), which contradicts the program's gender equality aims to increase women's decision-making in households and communities. This finding reinforces Carole Browner's (1986: 95) analysis of indigenous communities in Mexico: 'Caught between conflicting competing pressures emanating from the federal government and local populations, *municipio* authorities often act ambivalently when they are subject to efforts at state incorporation through the establishment of... development projects.' This ambivalence, I argue, stems from larger on-going negotiations on how gender power relations are shaped within the larger struggle for indigenous community autonomy in La Gloria.

It should be noted, however, that some indigenous communities aligned with the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) do not act ambivalently regarding efforts by the state to incorporate indigenous Mayans to development programs. Instead, the EZLN views the *Prospera* program and other development programs provided by the state as vehicles to divide the struggle for indigenous autonomy (EZLN, 2014).²⁶ While it is beyond the scope of this article to examine how the *Prospera* program may serve as tool by the state to undercut pan-Mayan political alignments, recent scholarship makes it clear that it is an issue worthy of debate (Mora, 2008).

Despite the effort of political parties to attract greater electoral participation among La Gloria residents, like in many – though not all – indigenous rural communities in Mexico women continue to face restrictions to electoral politics (Fox, 2007: 536). The women of La Gloria, however, are quite cognizant of their numerical advantage over the men in the community, which provides them a degree of political capital. As Doña Domingo illustrated, despite the *municipio* leadership's demand that women not address political matters during designated meetings pertaining to *Prospera*, they utilized the space offered by *Mayaonbej* to explore alternative political options outside the *cabecera - municipio* alliance. It is through *Mayaonbej* therefore that the women gained greater space to discuss the political possibilities they might have to bring about electoral change

²⁶ In one case, the EZLN identify how members of a paramilitary group that raided the community of La Realidad in the Municipality of Las Margaritas, clamored women in their party to come to their aid, reminding them of the government's statement that receipt of the *Prospera* program was contingent on assisting them in their violent attack, which resulted in the assassination of José Luis Solís López (http://www.elkilombo.org/ezln-homage-to-companero-galeano/#_edn1), accessed April 2, 2015. See also a report by human rights observers from the Center for Human Rights Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, AC. (http://www.frayba.org.mx/archivo/boletines/140505_boletin_16_agresiones_jbg.pdf), accessed April 2, 2015.

in the *cabecera*, weaken the *municipio*'s parochial hegemony in community affairs, and grant residents of La Gloria a degree of autonomy.

Autonomy for women, however, comes into question by the conditional requirements attached to the *Prospera* cash transfer program. The gendered expectation for young women to remain in the community, and fulfill household obligations is an ongoing pressure. The *Prospera* program, which requires recipients to remain in La Gloria for receipt of cash payments for the nutrition and ongoing education of their dependents, compounds these pressures. Both these factors, along with an established culture of migration that favors men, help explain the number of *de facto* head of households mothers with absent husbands who either pursue international (n = 40) or domestic (n = 22) migration to supplement stipend funds with remittances.

When youth reach age 18 they too can be identified as *titulares*, which some parents have utilized as a strategy to pursue international migration and have their elder progeny (mostly women) identified as *titulares*. The case of Lorena provides a poignant example of how the program's provision of cash transfers to women, particularly former student recipients of the program, are the very subjects who are supposed to directly benefit the most from the program's gender equality measures. Instead, these women are required to attend periodic health 'talks,' which restricts their mobility and potentially exposes them to invasive forms of contraceptive surveillance. These findings reveal how the *Prospera* program falls short of its gender equality goals and may actually restrict women's autonomy in families and communities.

Conclusion

My aim in this article has been to refine assumptions of Mexico's conditional cash transfer program, *Prospera*, and the impact its gender equality measures have in the lives of indigenous women, their families, and community. I argue that the *Prospera* program serves as an example of what scholars call neo-developmentalism, which Escobar (2010: 20) defines as 'forms of development understanding that do not question the fundamental premises of the development discourse of the last five decades, even if introducing a series of important changes.'

One of these important changes is the inclusion of gender equality discourse, but the cooption of gender by governments in Latin America has increasingly made gender and cultural rights a part of neoliberal governmentality (Lind, 2003, Schild, 2000). My findings build on this scholarship, and reveals how neoliberal forms of governance underlie the *Prospera* program, which reshape power relations across gender and ethnicity – through a process of coercion and consent – that reconstitutes local articulations of autonomy in an indigenous community in contemporary Mexico. This is evidenced by the *municipio* leadership's alignment with *Prospera* state agents in muting women's decision making, and the case of Lorena, who as the *titular* head-of-household negotiates her care-taking obligations under *Prospera*, which raise questions on the program's ability to promote gender equality and development.

My study also illuminates how indigenous women can be politically astute to find ways to exercise agency beyond the grasp of neoliberalizing hegemonic forms of governmentality. For instance, women actively engage in civic organizations as co-leaders, along with men, to promote local development, but also advise fellow members

to vote for political candidates. Indigenous women, therefore, create spaces of negotiability to maintain a degree of autonomy and in turn redefine the gender-power relations that undergird the *municipio* and *cabecera*.

Despite the *Prospera* program's claim to promote gender equality, its embrace of neoliberal tools of governmentality calls into question its ability to fulfill this goal of gender equality. *Prospera*, unintentionally perhaps, creates conditions that weaken indigenous struggles for autonomy while simultaneously blocking the economic and political incorporation of this group of Guatemalan refugees to the Mexican state.

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(<http://www.forcedmigration.org/podcasts-videos-photos/photos/guatemala>).

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Author biography

Dr. Gil-García, Assistant Professor of Sociology at DePauw University, conducts ethnographic research that lies at the intersection of forced migration, humanitarianism, and development. He has over ten years of expertise and experience in conducting research with disadvantaged indigenous Mayan refugees from Guatemala. His work examines barriers to their incorporation in La Gloria, a former refugee settlement located in Mexico's southernmost border state of Chiapas

and the US. Dr. Gil-García's scholarship is linked by three interrelated strands of research: First, his work integrates theories of race and gender to understand how the conditional cash transfer program, *Prospera* – a state run development program framed as promoting gender equality – impacts gender power relations and poverty among recipient families in La Gloria. A second strand explores how racist policies by the Mexican state toward the indigenous undermine post reconstruction efforts by indigenous Guatemalan refugees to propel ongoing international migration to the US. A third strand explores how race, class, and gender shape barriers to the incorporation of La Gloria migrant kin in the U.S. that include legalization and labor exploitation in the garment industry of Los Angeles, California.